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AUTHOR Hendricks, William A.
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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at an idea that the fundamental "social" purpose of college composition is not to expand but to contract students' capacities to function in and transform their world. The paper manifests interest in this conception of composition for intellectual, historical, and political reasons--historically, it addresses the contrast between this moment and the post-World War II era in composition when it was often accepted that not only was freshman composition a social sorting mechanism but that of course it should be. According to the paper, one of the most influential sources for composition studies' nervousness about the political and cultural meanings of freshman composition has been the work of Susan Miller. The paper discusses the use of Miller's essays "The Home Colony" and "Composition as a Cultural Artifact: Rethinking History as Theory" (which describes the beginnings of modern freshman composition at Harvard in the 1890s) in a graduate class in composition theory. It then considers the Spring 1993 issue of "Journal of Basic Writing," a special issue which collected papers presented at the fall 1992 National Basic Writing Conference, papers which could be seen as complementary to Miller's work. The paper also describes the experiences with university administrations of two instructors who have been teaching composition for several decades. It finds that in the 1990s, capitalism's conundrum with respect to higher education is how to get the right "kind" of student failure into the mix. (Contains 10 references.) (NKA)

Learning How to Fail: Freshman Composition and
Social Sorting in an Age of Diminishing Expectations.

by William A. Hendricks

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Bill Hendricks
California University

Conference on College
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**Learning How to Fail: Freshman Composition and Social Sorting
in an Age of Diminishing Expectations**

I'd like today to look briefly at an idea that has been entertained in Composition Studies with growing force and frequency in the last five years, the idea that the fundamental social purpose of college composition is not to expand but to contract students' capacities to function in and transform their world. I'm interested in this conception of Composition for intellectual, historical, and political reasons. Intellectually, I'm intrigued by the problem of trying to understand and ascribe agency to an institution within which I dwell; which of us has ever seen their own face? Historically, I am struck by the contrast between our own moment and the post-World War II era in Composition when it was often accepted that not only was freshman composition a social sorting mechanism but that of course it should be. And, politically, in 1995, at a time when the question for many composition students is not just whether they will make it through college but what difference it will make if they do, I am concerned with the consequences for egalitarian politics of teachers' self-identifications within institutions they maintain but do not control.

I think it's fair to say that one of the most influential sources for Composition Studies' current nervousness about the

political and cultural meanings of freshman composition has been the work of Susan Miller. Both in her 1990 book Textual Carnivals and in her more recent writing, Miller has challenged particularly those with professional and emotional attachments to Composition, among whom I include myself, to wonder about their roles in an institution that a century after its inception "is still hailed by, and still answers, a call to persuade students of their insufficiency as against 'important,' if not now necessarily canonical, writers" ("Rethinking History as Theory" 31). That quotation I take from Miller's essay "Composition as a Cultural Artifact: Rethinking History as Theory," a piece that I am using this semester in a graduate seminar in Composition Theory and Practice. In our discussions of this essay in class, my students have been quick to insist that they are not now participating and will not in the future participate in the regimen of policing the mechanical correctness of inconsequential "themes" whose goal, Miller says, has always been the production of "well-bred silence" (30). And my students have noted, further, that Miller's claim that composition courses continue to function today "to persuade students of their insufficiency as against 'important' . . . writers" seems to be contradicted by other current practices in composition we are also reading about in our course in essays like Joe Harris's "Reading the Right Thing" or Bartholomae and Petrosky's "Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts."

But to advance a few, or many, counter-examples against Miller's argument may be to miss its central political premise,

which I take to be not that Composition has kept students in their places but rather that the existence of composition courses has, even for those who do not take them, worked to inscribe the idea of "place-hood," the acceptance of natural inequality, within students. And yet Miller herself has been ambivalent on this point. At the conclusion of "The Home Colony," another of her recent essays, Miller writes:

Insofar as it remains an institutional requirement, many freshman composition courses thus operate precisely as continuing sites of in-house colonization. . . . Of the graduates we meet, 90% tell us that they are, after this universal instruction, "not very good at English." The other 10%, often those who productively contribute to public discourse, commonly tell us that they never had to take composition. (9)

I think that Miller's formulation here is unfortunate not because I doubt its referential truth. I mean, I do doubt its referential truth, but I am willing to accept it as a powerful trope for Miller's analysis of Composition as a system for social sorting. The trouble is that this particular formulation tends to negate both the idea and the fact of upward (and downward) social mobility upon which capitalism's discourse of natural inequality critically depends.

More strategic, better argued, is Miller's account both in "The Home Colony" and in the "Composition as a Cultural Artifact" essay of the beginnings of modern freshman composition at Harvard

in the 1890's. Harvard's English A was a course which, Miller maintains (against Richard Ohmann), was politically significant not because of its practical utility in training a new managerial elite for monopoly capitalism but rather because its almost total practical disutility was made to cooperate symbolically with an ideology in which success would be neither sought after nor sustainable absent the constant threatening presence of failure:

Our new student has taken Harvard's entrance exam; his infelicitous handwriting, spelling, and syntax have become a matter of public record. The reports of the Harvard Board of Overseers, widely circulated in the late nineteenth century, gleefully detailed his failings with the sympathy and understanding we might expect of young boys looking at a circus sideshow. Only two percent of his peers have actually been exempted from this course, but its new symbolic force asserts to our student that he could have escaped it. Imaginatively, at least, he might be among the already entitled, a group that constitutes the "better" class he may (or may not) eventually join.

("Rethinking History as Theory" 28)

The crucial point here, I take it, is not that Harvard's entrance exam divided the elect from the unwashed in perpetuity; social sorting did not then and does not now operate with that absolute finality. Most of the 98% of entering students assigned to English A were in fact able to complete their composition ordeal and move on to be "admitted to the 'principles' taught by vernacular

literature" (27). But in moving up the ladder these students carried with them their badge of having suffered, which became their entitlement to expect and extract virtuous suffering from others.

For its Spring 1993 number, the Journal of Basic Writing brought out a special issue collecting some of the papers presented at the Fall 1992 National Basic Writing Conference. Although these essays make no explicit references to Susan Miller's work, I think that they can be seen as complementary to it, debating in the context of Basic Writing some of the same issues foregrounded for Freshman Composition in Miller's writing of the early '90s. Based on my reading of these essays, I would say that the central dilemma posed by and for the participants in the 1992 Basic Writing Conference was this: how can Basic Writing as a field of study keep faith with its commitment to be precise in describing and theorizing the work of basic writers while simultaneously resisting the temptation to read these students' work exclusively in terms of the very categories that Basic Writing has been so diligently preparing for it? This is of course not only a pedagogical and scholarly question but a kind of political question as well, and the participants represented in the JBW special issue often, in various ways, at least allude to the idea that basic writing courses could be seen (if not necessarily by them) as naturalizing social inequality.

Yet there is also an interesting difference between the JBW essays and Susan Miller's "Cultural Artifact" and "Home Colony"

essays. Like Miller, many of the JBW authors have been writing program administrators; but unlike Miller they want to emphasize that some writing programs, courses, and teaching practices are better than others. Not that there is unanimity here about just what these best programs, courses, and practices are--but all of the JBW authors insist that such distinctions are both possible and consequential.

But why do I bring this up? What could be less remarkable than that writing program administrators should want to insist (as Susan Miller, too, does elsewhere) that what goes on and might go on in composition courses is of the greatest importance? And yet, although I have been (I'll admit it) a little surprised in my conversations this winter with a colleague at California University to learn that the composition courses he taught at the University of Illinois from the mid 1950s to the mid '60s had an uncanny resemblance to Miller's description of English A at Harvard in the 1890's, the real surprise has been to discover from my colleague that in the decade he taught composition at Illinois, almost no one, including the program administrator, was terribly interested in what was happening in these courses. During his years as a graduate student and later as a faculty adjunct, my colleague received a total of one day of instruction in the teaching of writing. He and the other TA's in his entering cohort were given a reader and the Harbrace handbook, told how to use the list of correction symbols at the back, and sent off to teach writing. They were expected to assign a certain number of themes in each

course, to use the correction symbols to make marginal notations of all errors in every student paper, and, at the end of the semester, to submit all student papers to the office. "There was," my colleague tells me, "no systematic communication between us about how we ran our classes." Only once in 10 years were any of his classes observed (Coleman).

When I began preparations for this paper, I had echoing in my mind an offhand remark made to me a number of years ago by one of my teachers at the University of Pittsburgh who, during the '50s and '60s, had been a grad assistant teaching composition at the University of Wisconsin. "You know, Bill," he said, "it was expected that we'd flunk a certain percentage of the students each semester" (Marshall). Thinking of that remark as I have read Susan Miller's work has contributed to the following hypothesis about post-World War II Composition: partly as a result of the first GI Bill, many colleges and universities after the War had more students than they could handle, and particularly at large research universities it was expected that graduate students in English, who largely staffed the freshman composition courses, would winnow the population; sponsoring and enforcing this practical demand for failure was the (usually tacit) ideological assumption that the TA's, personally, as aspiring literary scholars, and the universities, as professional licensing entities, could confirm their own worthiness only by constructing an opposing "unworthiness" in composition students that must be ferreted out and dismissed. That was my hypothesis, and though I have as yet

discovered nothing to make me doubt its essential accuracy, I am becoming a little suspicious of some of its phrasing, especially the implication that post-War Composition's need to "ferret out" student unworthiness was administered with fanatical zeal. It has been curious to me to hear from my colleague who taught writing at Illinois in the '50s and '60s how utterly casual were his ties to, and his program administrator's allegiance to, the courses that he taught and his boss theoretically supervised. Many students, particularly if they were unable to stop making mechanical errors, did fail these composition courses, sometimes flunking out of school as a result, but it seemed to be nothing personal.

One might say, I suppose, that the very fact that the program seemed impervious to administrative inattention, that it ran on its own inertia, can be read as an indication of how deeply the symbolic force of the sorting system begun at Harvard 60 years before had become entrenched. And one could note, additionally, that there was no professionally sanctioned impetus for anyone outside the system to meddle with it. Save for the program administrator and his associate director, none of the regular English faculty at Illinois ever taught composition during these years; they would have been, my colleague informs me, "ashamed" (his word) to do so.

But I suspect that there was also at play another more immediately economic factor. Outright failure (as in flunking out of school) was perhaps seen as less stark by, because less disruptive to, the student constituency paying the bill. Economic

opportunity for workers, access to living-wage jobs that didn't require a degree, was greater than it is today.

In the 1990s, capitalism's conundrum with respect to higher education is how to get the right kind of student failure into the mix. In a recent article in Radical Teacher, Paul Lauter argues that capitalism today must restrict access to college since "[higher education] raises expectations far too high. It encourages workers to aspire beyond what labor discipline must impose" (37). On the other hand (and this Lauter does not say), healthy college enrollments are economically vital not only to the colleges themselves but to the banks that are providing the loans to assist students in running up enormous indebtedness by the time when, after five or six or more years, they may finally graduate. How, then, can students be made grateful to pay the bill? In this context, Susan Miller's phrase "well-bred silence" seems to me not just a historical curiosity but more apposite than ever. But equally relevant, I would say, are the objections of those who would insist that composition courses ought to and can do more than teach survival.

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